

An Open Letter from the UMass Adopted Student Advisory Panel

Dear Adoption Researchers, Family, Friends, and Allies,

With this letter we hope to reflect on our experiences as adoptees and use our voices to raise awareness about the challenges we face. We will build on the discussion we began at our panel, “The Future of Adoption as Seen by UMass College Students Who Are Adopted,” and challenge ourselves, as well as all of you, to critically think about the future of adoption. We aim to use our knowledge and experiences to improve upon the lives of those who will one day be part of the adoption community.

As members of the Adopted Student Advisory Panel (ASAP), we recognize the importance of educating ourselves and our community about adoption. ASAP, which was founded in 2016 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, was originally formed to create a safe and welcoming environment for adopted students to share their stories. Our mission is to advise professionals and non-professionals in the field of adoption about how to best support adoptees and their families.

In addition, we engage in adoption-related advocacy by raising awareness on campus about the lived experience of those who are adopted. This group is distinct because as an all-adoptee group we have the space to discuss complex issues as a shared experience, rather than as an abstract current event. Despite the similarities in our background, many members did not have the opportunity to share a space like this prior to attending university. Outside of our group, we have also planned and attended a variety of adoption related events. We have served on panels educating students and adoptive parents about our experiences, shared our stories on social media to raise awareness about adoption, and held our own conference to bring attention to the

Leadership of the UMass Adopted Student Advisory Panel: L to R (standing): Emma Sander, Victoria Griswold, Jen Dolan (organization sponsor), Jennifer Mut n, Ana Dolan, Peter McGinn. (kneeling in front): Ana Gremli



challenges adoptees face. These opportunities inspired us to become more involved in the larger adoption community, so we were thrilled when we were asked to present at the 2018 Rudd Adoption Conference.

As a diverse group of international adoptees, it was challenging to synthesize our different perspectives and experiences. Over the course of several months we met to compare stories and reflect on our upbringings and shared obstacles. During these conversations, we noted what had gone well and what we wished our parents, siblings, and even ourselves, had done differently. Based on our discussions, we developed four main questions: (1) What is the biggest challenge we face as adoptees, (2) how can families and adoptees come together to ensure the well-being of adoptees, (3) what do we think professionals and researchers in the adoption community need to know, and (4) what policies and practices should be implemented and/or regulated to directly benefit the adoption community. By answering these questions and offering anecdotal evidence, we hope to provide insight into the adoptee's perspective and contribute to further discourse on the future of adoption.

What is the Biggest Challenge We Face as Adoptees?

As adoptees, we need our community to understand and appreciate that although we have overcome similar obstacles, we also face individual challenges. For example, **Ana Gremlı**, an adoptee from Moldova, remembers having to justify her status as an international adoptee because she "looked too much like her parents" to be adopted. Growing up, Gremlı's peers held the misconception that all international adoptions were transracial. Gremlı did not fit this stereotype because both she and her adoptive family are Caucasian, so her peers constantly questioned her adoption identity. As a child, it was difficult for Gremlı to ignore the comments that invalidated her identity as an international adoptee. In contrast, **Jennifer Mutén**, a transracial adoptee from Bolivia, struggled to integrate her racial,

MEET THE AUTHORS

ANA DOLAN

Ana Dolan is a senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst completing a bachelor's degree in Psychology. She is currently the President of the Adopted Student Advisory Panel and continues to raise awareness about adoption and educate her peers and community about the experiences of adoptees. As a young transracial adoptee, she struggled to understand what it meant to be "Latina" and was confused about her racial identity. However, she is now proud of being a transracial adoptee from Guatemala and identifies as a Latina with indigenous ancestry. After graduation, she plans to apply to medical school where she hopes to support underrepresented groups and work with the medical community to raise awareness about the challenges adoptees face. She also intends to travel to Latin American countries to provide medical assistance and health education services.

ethnic, and cultural identities. Throughout her life, Mutén has been caught in a continuous battle between her Bolivian heritage and Swedish upbringing. When Mutén was younger, she felt pressured to forge a connection to her birth country because she "looked the part." However, after one of Mutén's friends passively told her she was not a "real" Latina, she began to question whether she felt connected to her Bolivian heritage or if that connection had been manufactured. Mutén quickly realized that the family who had lovingly raised her in a Swedish-American household, were her people, and with them is where her identity rests. Eventually, Mutén came to accept that others would miscategorize her based on her physical characteristics, but also recognized that she had the final say over her identity. Unlike these other two adoptees, **Emma Sander**, a transracial adoptee from China, focused on learning about her life before adoption. Sander was adopted at 19 months old and was given limited information about her birth family or birthplace. Consequently, Sander felt disconnected from this part of her

life. As a way to cope, she invented a story about a jade necklace her birth mother gave her and recounted the story to anyone who would listen. Over time, Sander accepted that she may never know her complete origin story, but it was hard for her younger self to understand this. Although all three anecdotes were shared by internationally adopted women in their early to mid-twenties, their central issues with adoption vary depending on their personal conceptions of race, ethnicity, and non-traditional familial constructs.

It is essential for adoption professionals to acknowledge these differences because they ultimately determine the type of support we need. For this reason, we urge professionals to avoid using a one-size fits all approach when working with adoptees. Instead, we encourage them to understand each adoptee's needs and provide them with specific resources and information about how to overcome their challenges. We understand that this is not a simple task, but we believe this type of individualized support will help the adoption community ensure the well-being of adoptees.

JENNIFER MUTÉN

Jennifer Mutén graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2018 with a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Education. She has been an active member of the Adopted Student Advisory Panel since 2016. Currently, she works as a City Year AmeriCorps Member and hopes to stay closely involved with the adoption community after her year of service. At nine months old, her Swedish father and American mother adopted her from Bolivia. Despite her high levels of melanin, she self-identifies as a white and brown Swedish-American. However, she claims that because race is a social construct that changes throughout space and time, her identity is always under construction and subject to change. She hopes that fellow adoptees will work to ensure their voices are heard.

How Can Families and Adoptees Come Together to Ensure the Well-being of Adoptees?

We have often been told that, "we did not choose to be adopted, but it is our responsibility to come to terms with it." While we must come to terms with our identities, it is unfair for us to carry this burden alone. Considering adoption is defined by the "traditional family," the family is necessarily involved in adoptee identity formation. Therefore, we cannot complete our conceptualization of adoption without our families and they cannot form a comprehensive view of adoption without us.

Thus, the well-being of adoptees thoroughly depends on lifelong communication within the family unit. As children, we spend most of our time with our families and are influenced by their words and actions. Hence, our family's willingness to discuss adoption impacts our perception of this topic. When adoptive parents fail to create a welcoming environment for adoptees to explore their identity, discuss struggles, and ask questions, parents create a household in which adoptees must rely on themselves. For instance, **Peter McGinn**, an adoptee from Russia, remembers feeling confused about his identity because he did not know who to talk to about his adoption. McGinn's parents were divorced shortly after he was adopted, so he constantly moved between two households. Although he tried to talk to both his parents about adoption, he found it difficult to talk to his father because he seldom initiated conversations about adoption. This responsibility often fell on McGinn and he recalls conversations being more focused on the divorce rather than adoption. This lack of dialogue around adoption made it difficult for McGinn to openly express his feelings about his identity. McGinn's perception of adoption was also influenced by his older, non-adopted brother. During sibling arguments, McGinn's brother would often say, "I wish they picked a different one" or "you're not my real brother." While these comments most likely came from a place of ignorance and misunderstanding, they created the foundation upon which McGinn conceptualized adoption. On the other hand, parents who initiate adoption-based conversations

PETER MCGINN

Peter McGinn was adopted from St. Petersburg Russia when he was 2 years old and spent most of his life living in Andover, MA. His Russian birth name is Nikolai and he was adopted into a white family as a white Caucasian male. He is currently finishing up his first year at Mississippi State University College of Veterinary Medicine with the hope of becoming a clinician and professor at a veterinary school. When he first came to UMass, he never really had to think about his adoption outside of bringing it up when asked for a “cool fun fact” during icebreakers. Through the incredible work of Jen Dolan, Hal Grotevant, and so many others, he and other adoptees founded ASAP on campus, thus providing a place where adoptees could congregare and share their stories and lived experiences.

A note from Peter McGinn:

Thank you for taking the time to read our collaborative write up of the amazing panel we were so fortunate to be a part of. We all grew so much as we organized and designed a panel that we could all be proud of. We are so grateful you could come along on this journey with us.

Peter Nikolai McGinn

UMass Amherst Class of 2017

aid in developing secure identities. For example, Emma Sander remembers her mother encouraging her to discuss adoption and find healthy ways to process her feelings through journaling. Although conversations surrounding adoption were sometimes uncomfortable, Sander noted that having the opportunity to discuss these subjects made it easier to process her experiences.

When parents do not actively encourage adoption speech then by extension, they postpone identity exploration. This is evidenced by McGinn who simply needed space to process but was denied reasonable opportunities. Children should not have to seek out support, rather, parents need to be

proactive in their approach. Non-adopted siblings must also be included in the conversation so they can formulate their own understanding of adoption. These conversations may initially be uncomfortable but with time, the topic will become normalized. Moving forward, professionals and parents must appreciate the value of adoption specific conversations and provide families with the tools to mediate such discussions.

Adoption cannot be processed in one conversation; rather, it is a subject that needs to be revisited over time. In early childhood, several panelists recall vague conversations about adoption with no follow-up. Although discussing adoption at a young age is crucial for identity formation, parents need to acknowledge that understanding one’s adoptee identity is a never-ending process that carries through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Thus, continuous support and participation from family will ease this burden off of adoptees. We hope professionals and parents can work more closely to help adoptees explore their identity and find the support they need.

What Do We Think Professionals and Researchers in the Adoption Community Need to Know?

One of our major concerns is the lack of support for adoptees within the education system. Despite the fact that children spend a large portion of their time at school, there are few adoption competent educators. Throughout our academic careers, many of us dealt with numerous bionormative microaggressions, both from our teachers and peers. For example, **Ana Dolan**, a transracial adoptee from Guatemala, remembers her high school teachers questioning that she and her brother were related because they did not share any physical characteristics. She constantly had to defend herself and insist she was telling the truth. Dolan attempted to discuss these issues with her teachers, but their lack of experience with such topics made it difficult for them understand her concerns. With the growing acceptance of adoption, we would hope there would be better support systems for adoptees;

however, this does not seem to be the case. One of ASAP's previous members, Ana Gremlı, works at a public elementary school as a special education teacher and she has noticed that her coworkers, ranging from teachers to school counselors, are not properly equipped to support adoptees or children in foster care. In the near future, school employees need to be required to complete adoption competency training. If trainings are not available in schools, educators should at least be prepared to share community resources with families. Often overlooked, foster children and adoptees are marginalized populations. It is assumed that after placement, foster children and adoptees are fine, but managing the after effects of adoption is a life-long process. These children deserve to get their education from professionals who will meet their struggles with empathy and care.

The foundation of adoption research is rooted in the pathologization of adoptees. After our examination of adoption studies of the biopsychosocial and developmental consequences of adoption, we were simultaneously angered, scared, disturbed, and overwhelmed. While these studies stress our unfortunate reality, we are more than our deficiencies. We urge researchers to explore areas in which adoptees excel. As adoptees, we have a rare opportunity for introspection and identity formation, something that most people do not confront until a much older age. Furthermore, the struggles we endured taught us resiliency and the stigma we experienced taught us empathy. Navigating the uncertainties of adoption is difficult and exhaustive work, but we have to believe that, in some ways, we have benefited from it. By understanding the strengths of adopted children, we will not only enhance our knowledge of adoption, but we will also provide adoptees with a reason to be proud of their identity.

What Policies and Practices Should Be Implemented and/or Regulated to Directly Benefit the Adoption Community?

There needs to be an increase in adoption and foster care specific training for adoption professionals. Currently, social workers and counselors

are not required to have adoption specific training before they obtain their license. Adoptees and children in foster care often have individual needs that must be addressed, therefore it is imperative to have all social workers and counselors complete adoption specific training. At the very least, we hope adoption agencies require training for their employees. We believe that if professionals have a better understanding of the challenges adoptees and children in foster care face, they will be more prepared to guide them through these issues. We know this is a concern for the entire adoption community, but we want to reiterate how important it is to have adoption competent professionals moving forward.

Moreover, post adoption services need to be vastly improved. As a group we were unable to recall any social workers or adoption agencies following up with us after our adoptions were finalized. Nor did we remember anyone contacting our families to evaluate our status or provide us with guidance. However, it is important for adoption agencies to follow up because it provides the family a chance to voice concerns, ask for help, and find resources.

ANA GREMLI

Ana Gremlı is 24 years old and was adopted from Chisinau, Moldova when she was 2 years old. Currently she teaches 1st and 2nd grade special education in Springfield Massachusetts. She attended the University of Massachusetts Amherst from 2012-2016 and majored in Psychology and Early Childhood Education. At UMass she was a member of the Adoption Mentoring Partnership for 3 years as well as ASAP post-graduation. She presented with the Rudd program and Big Brothers Big Sisters at the National Mentoring Conference in Washington D.C. in 2015 and facilitated the Adoption Mentorship Partnership break out session at the 2016 RUDD Conference at UMASS. She hopes to continue raising awareness about adoption and share her adoption story with anyone who will listen as she continues her journey throughout adulthood.

EMMA SANDER

Emma Sander graduated from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2018 with a degree in Sociology, focusing in social work, and a minor in Education. She was adopted from China when she was 19 months old and identifies as Chinese-American. Growing up in a predominantly Caucasian town, she felt challenged by her peers to defend both parts of her identity. It was not until she found community in the adoption organization that she began to feel heard and understood. Sander, along with a couple of other adoptees, founded the Adopted Student Advisory Panel in 2016 and she served as the President for the organization. She encourages adoptees to seek out community and opportunities to learn from each other's perspectives.

During the initial adjustment period, there should be regular check-ins, but once families are more comfortable, the number of follow ups could decrease. Additionally, agencies could periodically send newsletters to parents about upcoming trainings, support groups, and current research. Adoption professionals should also offer counseling services for adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth parents or recommend adoption competent counselors in the community. For post adoption services that already exist, our main focus should be to advertise them more effectively and/or make them required.

Lastly, attention needs to be drawn to the challenges international adoptees face due to their limited access to family medical history. For example, **Victoria Griswold**, an ASAP alumnus, has had a variety of health problems growing up. Going to the doctors was often a physically and emotionally draining event because Griswold had to have additional tests done to determine what was wrong. As a child, Griswold was not bothered by her limited medical history, but as she has grown, it has made her increasingly uncomfortable. This lack of information not only heightens stress, but the high cost of medical testing can also

lead to financial burdens. Another ASAP member, Ana Dolan, often thinks about how her unknown medical history might affect her ability to start a family. She has no information about her birth family and fears that she may have fertility issues or that her children may inherit a genetic disorder. Although she is not ready to have children yet, she constantly thinks about these issues and is scared of what the future holds. Considering our adoptions happened twenty years ago, we are not surprised that we have no medical histories; but, for new adoptees, this is horrifying. Testing for genetic diseases and predispositions is a safe, established science and is increasingly available on the commercial market. The question, then, is why are biological tests for adoptees not a government funded mandate?

In the future, the community must find the opportunity to discuss this issue in greater detail and establish ways to minimize the challenges that come with it. Our primary recommendation is that sending countries require birth parents to share all medical histories before they relinquish parental rights. If this is not a possibility, then adoptees must get tested for common genetic disorders. There are many ethical, political and economic concerns that would need to be discussed before the adoption community could even consider making any changes. For instance, how would it be funded and how much information would be released to the adoptive parents? Nonetheless, we believe this is a topic worth discussing and want to make sure that the right to health is a primary concern.

VICTORIA GRISWOLD

Victoria Griswold graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 2018 with a degree in Natural Resource Conservation. She was adopted from South Korea when she was six months old and identifies as Korean-American. As an undergraduate, she was a part of ASAP for two years and served as the Event Coordinator for the organization.

Closing Remarks

While there is so much room for growth, innovation, and diversity of thought, sometimes the work ahead of us can feel overwhelming. **We wanted to end on a simple message of strength and determination: *Our community has a voice and it will be heard, it needs to be heard.*** Our shared sentiment is that community is so much more than just like-minded individuals coming together; it means having someone there to support you when you need it most and having others to push you when your self doubt is crippling. Community provides the foundation for diverse ideas to come together and produce courageous solutions to daunting obstacles. We, a collective group of strangers, united by a common identity, have become a family, and for many of us, we would not be the individuals we are today without the continuous support and guidance of our peers. Being members of ASAP has helped us appreciate the power of community and acknowledge the importance of sharing our stories. What made this panel such a resounding success is that, despite the innumerable ways in which our stories differed, we came to the consensus that adoption must be an ongoing conversation. Regardless of the nature of adoption, international, transracial, domestic, same sex parents, etc., the one unifying arc is that continuing to ask questions, connecting across journeys, and forming allyship between adoptees and non-adoptees is the only way to make progress. Our perspective is only one part of a larger picture, but we hope we have provided insight into the adoptee's experience and helped establish a foundation for the future of adoption.

Sincerely,

University of Massachusetts Adopted Student
Advisory Panel

